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FLOOR STATEMENT BY SENATOR JOHN C. STENNIS  
FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 1971

RE: PENTAGON PAPERS

Mr. President, the recent publication of large portions of the "Pentagon Papers", the court cases in which the documents were involved, and the transmittal of a full set of the documents to the Congress have produced a great many analyses, speculations, charges, and refutations about the responsibility for our involvement in Vietnam. Today I introduce a Resolution to provide for a careful study of these documents together with related documents.

As I believe it will become clear, the method I suggest is one which will place initial responsibility for analyzing this range of important issues in the hands of trained historians. They are the professionals best equipped to establish, by careful research, what transpired during the difficult period covered by the 47 Pentagon volumes.

It is now quite clear that the analysis included in the Pentagon Papers is not based on complete Government records. For example, the August 9 issue of Time magazine reports that the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research has done a study covering the period. Moreover, the coordinator of the Pentagon Papers study has himself stated that that analysis was not prepared by men schooled in the techniques of historical research. It is therefore not surprising that the document is producing charges and recriminations.

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The anonymous analysis and, to a lesser extent, the basic documents have received a good deal of attention in the press. But I believe one illustration will show that the press is no better able to give us an objective account of such a tangled and complex subject than the anonymous Pentagon analysts. The press, in its constant thirst for simple judgments and in the excitement of conflict, has extrapolated from partial quotations to assertions, from assertions to alleged facts, and from facts to headlines. On June 14, for example, a reporter from the New York Times, Mr. Neil Sheehan, took from a document part of the following sentence:

"If such larger decisions are required at any time by a change in the situation, they will be taken."

and reported that an anonymous Pentagon analyst interpreted this as a "general consensus" in September of 1964 that air attacks against North Vietnam would probably have to be launched. The newspaper report then goes on to assume that this conclusion is a fact by stating

"That such a consensus had been reached as early as September is a major disclosure of the Pentagon study." (Emphasis added)

I might add that two other publications -- The Washington Post on June 20 and Newsweek on June 28 -- expressed reservations about this particular extrapolation. But the "Times" account shows how a cryptic conditional sentence is magnified first into an opinion, then a fact, and finally a major issue on the front pages.

As Chairman of one of the interested Committees, Mr. President, I hope I will offend no one if I suggest that planned House and Senate inquiries will not by themselves answer the public demand for a full, careful

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and dispassionate analysis of what actually transpired during the years covered by the Pentagon volumes. We should understand that, in this matter, we operate under two handicaps.

First of all, hard pressed members of the Congress have neither the time nor the resources for the research and reflection required. A few of our Members, such as the distinguished Senator from Wyoming, Mr. McGee, are trained professional historians. But a study of this magnitude would simply eclipse all other important responsibilities for all of us who were engaged in it.

Even more importantly, many of us have been involved in one way or another in decisions about the war in Vietnam. Our judgment and the judgment of staffs who work for us are not likely to be viewed as dispassionate and objective in the matter.

I do not mean to imply at all that Congress has no useful role to play in assessing our involvement in Vietnam. We of the Congress have certain legislative responsibilities which the Pentagon Papers, and related investigations, may help us to fulfill. For my own part, I believe that Congressional investigations will help us sort out the complications of the security

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classification problem. It is my belief that the current tendency to over-classify is dangerous in two ways: it makes it difficult for truly sensitive matters to be properly protected; and it denies the public and the Congress, important information about other matters that have no need to be classified, or at least no need to be classified for long.

I also believe that investigations which have already been begun by our Committees will help us come to terms with the important issue of making Congress's constitutional power to declare a war a reality in the twentieth century. I have already introduced Senate Joint Resolution 95 dealing with this matter, and other Senators have made similar proposals. I believe that all of these proposals can be better evaluated after we have a more complete understanding of some of the events which led us into the Vietnam War, in particular the Gulf of Tonkin affair.

In these matters the Congressional responsibility is very clear and explicit. The Pentagon Papers, now available to us, should help us discharge our responsibilities, but without involving us in any attempt to write history -- a task for which, as I have said, Congress has neither the time or the resources.

There are Americans, however, who are uniquely equipped to write history: our professional historians. It is to them we should turn for an exhaustive and deliberate treatment of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In an excellent article in the Washington Post on July 7, (inserted in the Congressional Record on July 7 by the distinguished Senator from Wyoming, Mr. McGee, at page S 10561) Mr. Henry Owen compares our current public

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agonies over the Vietnam involvement to the charges which followed World Wars I and II. He asserts, and I believe the assertion is accurate, that for each war in which the United States has been involved, including both World War I and World War II, public opinion about the origin of the war is divided into three phases: Phase I in which the Government's picture of the conflict's origin is accepted; Phase 2 in which some initial accounts showing conflicting views convince many people that the war was largely the fault of their own leaders; and Phase 3 in which, as Mr. Owen puts it, "professional historians showed the truth to be a lot more complicated than any of these 'devil' theories would suggest." Mr. Owen goes on to say that we are now in Phase 2 on Vietnam, and it is important that we move as quickly as possible to Phase 3.

I believe there is much wisdom in this analysis, Mr. President. The longer we continue to deal with the origins of the Vietnam War in an atmosphere of anger, recrimination, and domestic politics, the deeper will be the wounds on our society. The sooner we can have an objective and disinterested account by professional researchers of the origins, the conduct, and the wide-ranging effects of the Vietnam War, the sooner we will be able to begin the healing that can only come from understanding.

Of course, there are certain difficulties presented in attempting to write a history of a period so recent, using in large measure, classified information. But there are also precedents for dealing with these problems. For example, immediately after World War II, virtually the entire United States Government Archives, for the years immediately preceding World

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War II, including classified information, were thrown open to two distinguished historians: William L. Langer, and S. Everett Gleason. They were given, in Mr. Langer's words, "full run of the State Department Archives, the papers of the Office of Strategic Services, and even, to a limited extent, of the records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff." In addition, they had access to the Roosevelt papers at Hyde Park, the Morgenthau Diaries, and many other records. Moreover, British and other foreign data was made available to them as a matter of courtesy. Their manuscript was submitted to the State Department before publication, but only -- and I emphasize the word "only" -- for a security check. The two volumes they produced did much to increase our understanding of the origins of World War II during the period in which the reasons for our involvement were still a matter of passionate national debate.

I believe that our experience in this matter gives us a valuable indication of the way in which we should proceed to deal with the historical record of our involvement in Vietnam. I propose that an independent Board of Historians be established to direct a non-partisan, professional historical study of our involvement in Vietnam -- the origins, conduct, and effects of the war. This board would do the following:

- (1) Work out arrangements whereby the materials of the Federal Government and other materials which deal with the period and subject of our involvement in Vietnam -- from World War II through 1968 -- would be open to certain historians.

- (2) Arrange, with the cooperation of the relevant officials of the Executive Branch, for appropriate security review procedures.

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(3) Arrange for financing of the study. I am proposing an initial grant of \$250,000 to finance organization of the project, and I would be favorably disposed towards additional grants if they are later required. However, I would hope that private funding would also be obtained so that the study would not be viewed as an authorized government version of the Vietnam history.

(4) Establish such advisory and editorial boards as may be necessary.

The details of these arrangements I believe would best be worked out by the historians themselves and the relevant offices in the Government, such as the Historical Division of the Department of State. I would hope that Congress would consider favorably any small additional requests for funds by such offices which might be required to facilitate the provision of documents or other services.

Many will ask how classified documents of recent vintage can be used in an historical study of this sort without damaging the national security. I believe there are three possible answers to this question.

First of all I would suggest that the number of historians associated with the project be relatively small and that their professional quality be high.

I believe that we will be able to insure that we will have a balanced group of responsible and objective men who would have no interest in harming the security of the United States.

Second, the arrangement by which Mr. Langer and Mr. Gleason worked on the pre-World War II archives was a good one. As I mentioned

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earlier, their manuscript was submitted to the Department of State for a security check, but only for a security check, before being published.

Finally, there may be certain documents in the archives dealing specifically with such matters as cryptography, for which special arrangements may have to be made and access would have to be denied to all but, say, one or two historians. I would leave such arrangements to the discretion of the relevant offices within the Executive Branch and the Board of Historians directing the study.

I do not believe the specific measures I have outlined in the Resolution are the only possible avenues to the success of this project. Some may be changed as the Senate discusses this Resolution. Many details must be worked out between the historians and the offices concerned. But I believe that, whatever the specific measures adopted, it is important that a study of this type be done -- thorough, professional, non-partisan, and disinterested.

Mr. President, many years ago the German historian, Ranke, father of modern historical scholarship, said it is history's task to tell what "actually happened." That appraisal has since come under fire from many historians who contend that a wholly objective analysis of events can never be achieved.

Objectivity will be especially difficult to achieve in any study of the Vietnam war. However, I do not believe there is any better way to approach a reasoned analysis of the "Pentagon Papers" period than to assign the task to a group of competent historians and give them all possible assistance in obtaining all the pertinent data. A free and rational people will, I believe, be able and anxious to learn from that sort of disinterested history.